

Testimony before the Committee on Higher Education and Employment Advancement

HB 5300: An Act Requiring Legislative Approval for the Merger or Closing of Institutions Within the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities and Prohibiting the Consolidation of the Regional Community-Technical Colleges

**Submitted by Francis M. Coan, Ph.D., Professor of History, Tunxis Community College
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Representative Elliot, Senator Slap, Representative Haines, Senator Witkos, and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

My name is Francis Coan. I am a Professor of History at Tunxis Community College and have served that institution for the past thirty-one years. Between 2007 and 2019, I chaired the Social Sciences and History Department. Currently, I am the elected Tunxis representative on the Board of Regents Faculty Advisory Committee and the President of the Tunxis Professional Staff Organization.

I strongly support House Bill 5300 and urge you to pass it. If enacted into law, this bill will end the ongoing disaster that is the so-called Students First plan to merge the twelve independently-accredited community colleges into a single massive, centralized entity, governed by a group of managers housed in offices in Hartford (home to the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities---CSCU---system office) and New Britain (home to the Connecticut State Community College---CSCC---system office). Even more importantly, it will restore the oversight power the General Assembly possessed over the community colleges and Connecticut state universities until the creation of the Board of Regents (BOR) in 2011.

In a cover letter accompanying the substantive change proposal submitted on February 11, 2022 to the regional accreditation agency, the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE), dated February 11, 2022, CSCU President Terrence Cheng, BOR Chairman Matt Fleury, and CSCC Interim President Michael Rooke offer four reasons why the so-called Students First plan must be continued and implemented:

1. “A steady enrollment decline”
2. “Lagging student success metrics”
3. “An unsustainable financial trajectory”
4. “Systemic inequities—both between [sic] students of different socioeconomic backgrounds and between [sic] institutions”

Regarding the enrollment decline, this began several years before the BOR approved the so-called Students First plan in 2017 and has continued ever since. Moreover, higher education institutions throughout the United States are faced with this challenge, which is largely governed by demographics (i.e., a dwindling population of high school graduates). While the COVID-19

pandemic has reduced enrollments at most colleges and universities, decisions made by the BOR may well have exacerbated, and may well worsen, the enrollment problem at CSCU institutions. For example, how will raising community college tuition 5 percent each fiscal year *for the next six fiscal years*, as the BOR proposes to do, help attract or retain students? Although a portion (40 percent) of the tuition increase will be set aside for financial aid, and about 70 percent of community college students have all or most of their tuition and fees paid for by financial aid, the Pledge to Advance Connecticut (PACT) program, or by grants or scholarships, about 20 percent of students are ineligible for such assistance. Some of these students will be priced out of the ability to attend college, or at least will be forced to take a reduced course load.

To date, virtually all of the limited savings that Students First has achieved has come through faculty and staff attrition. How does reducing staff in Marketing and Advertising (and planning to lay off the majority of those who remain), Admissions, Financial Aid (another area targeted for layoffs), and other essential student service areas enhance enrollment? How does replacing the community college presidents with CEOs and stripping the latter of almost all authority to make decisions based on the trends, needs, and conditions within each service area stabilize enrollment? How does creating a CSCC system office—a new bureaucracy of managers and administrators, ensconced in an office suite in New Britain, seemingly tasked with directing and hampering, not supporting and facilitating, the work of faculty and staff at the colleges—help enrollment?

Regarding student success metrics, community college students are disproportionately young, working class or poor, and of color. They and their families suffered, and in many cases are still suffering, the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most come to us academically underprepared for higher education and facing a host of other challenges and obstacles, including poverty, hunger, homelessness, tumultuous family dynamics, the need to work to support themselves and their families, and psychological and emotional problems. The Board of Regents has approved a plan to eliminate developmental education and place all students in college-level coursework in their first semester. How will that serve the majority of our students who are not prepared to do college-level work when they begin their higher education careers? How many professional tutors, writing and mathematics laboratory staff, librarians, and mental health counselors will be hired to provide the vital support many of these students will need in order to succeed in college? I see no such positions included in the draft organizational charts for CSCC. How many more full-time faculty will be hired to replace those who have retired recently and will be retiring soon, and to augment the army of part-time faculty who comprise three-quarters of community college instructors? Part-time instructors are paid to teach but not to perform the myriad of other tasks full-time instructors perform including—vitality—advising, mentoring, encouraging, and retaining students.

Regarding the unsustainable financial trajectory, when Students First was first approved in December 2017, it included a projected implementation cost of *not a single penny*. By 2023, the actual cost of implementation may well near or reach \$100 million. In FY 21 and FY 22, the CSCC system office will cost Connecticut taxpayers at least \$30.7 million, most of that salaries and fringe for a group of managers administering an institution that is not accredited, offers no classes, has no students, sees no students, and benefits no students. In the substantive change proposal to NECHE (p.28), President Cheng, Chair Fleury, and Interim President Rooke admit

begrudgingly that creating a new bureaucratic apparatus whilst having to fund twelve colleges resulted in “some cost duplication” and “upfront costs,” but they offer no figures for these costs.

One of the most dubious assumptions included in the community college consolidation financial projections is the efficacy of a series of reforms that fall under the umbrella of Guided Pathways (GP). Central to GP implementation is the hiring of 174 GP advisors and leads, to be distributed among the twelve community colleges, a process that will be complete by the end of this semester. Most of the salary and fringe for these advisors (about \$18 million per year, rising to closer to \$19 million within a few years) is being funded with federal HEERF money, which will not be available after FY 23. No monies have been budgeted to pay the salaries and fringe of these employees past FY 23. CSCU management is banking on the assumption that GP implementation—in particular, the work of the GP advisors and leads—will result in an increase in student enrollment of 5 percent in FY 23, 10 percent in FY 24, and 17.5 percent in each of FY 25, FY 26, FY 27, and FY 28. These projected increases in student enrollment are, in turn, supposed to generate additional tuition dollars more than sufficient to pay the costs of the 174 GP staff. If these enrollment projections, which are based on nothing but dangerous wishful thinking, are off in the least (and they will be), CSCU management will have exacerbated, not resolved, the supposed “unsustainable fiscal trajectory” they cite.

Regarding systemic inequities among institutions, the best way to address these is to provide each college sufficient funding, personnel, and autonomy to address the needs of the students and residents in its respective service area. Managers in distant offices, centralized decision-making, uniform approaches, reliance on advice purchased from consultants, and an austerity mindset will not fix inequities.

The same is true of addressing systemic inequities among socioeconomic groups. It is worth noting that this so-called “central aim” of the consolidation plan (see cover letter to substantive change proposal to NECHE) was conspicuously absent from the Students First plan until 2019, nearly two years after the BOR approved the plan, when the previous CSCU President, Mark Ojakian, began to cite differences in outcomes among different groups of students as a reason why the community college consolidation had to occur. Why this change in focus and emphasis? Might it have been driven, at least in part, by the growing realization that the consolidation was costing more money than it was saving, was far behind schedule, was opposed by the large majority of faculty and staff (as it still is) and was completely disrupting operations at all twelve community colleges (as it still is)?

Since their founding, the Connecticut community colleges have enabled many thousands of Connecticut residents, most of them with few or no other higher education options, to receive excellent educations, transfer to and graduate from four-year institutions, enter and advance in the workforce, enrich and better their lives, and thus better and strengthen the state. The community college merger plan, not yet fully implemented, has already resulted in diminished student services and increased costs to the taxpayers. Instead of fostering collaboration among management and employees, it has pit system office bureaucrats, who have a vested interest in seeing the plan through, against faculty and staff, who face loss of control over the curriculum, their work, and their ability to help students. If implemented, it will also result in a sharp reduction in the number of degree programs available to students, a homogenization of these

programs, and a lowering of academic rigor. While many of the students who attend community college are disadvantaged, they are as deserving of an opportunity to succeed as their socio-economically more fortunate peers. They need to be offered a robust, rich, appropriately rigorous college education and experience, not a third-rate facsimile of same, funded accordingly.

In closing, I again urge your support for HB 5300 and restoration of legislative oversight over the CSCU system. Given the myriad of problems inherent in the so-called Students First plan and given that, if implemented, it will transform the community college system into something it is not and was not designed to be, it is imperative that the elected representatives of the citizenry have the final say in the plan's fate, as well as that of other plans that may follow.

Thank you for your consideration.